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GUEST: **Olara A. Otunnu**
Special Representative of the United Nations
Secretary-General for Children And Armed Conflict

JOURNALISTS: Ian Williams, The Nation
Rob Watson, BBC

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CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

"There are 250,000 children participating in conflicts around the world," says Olara A. Otunnu, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. He describes his job as that of a "humanitarian diplomat". In this interview, Mr. Otunnu talks about the hardship of children who find themselves fighting in conflicts and what the international community can do to ensure that children's rights are not violated in wars. His message to the international community is clear: if you brutalize children, you will have to pay a very high price.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle.**

Since the 1990 World Summit for Children, the United Nations has sought to draw international attention to the horrendous plight of children affected by armed conflict. Our guest today is a public advocate and a moral voice on behalf of children whose rights, safety and welfare have been violated because of wars. He is Olara A. Otunnu, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Otunnu are Ian Williams of *The Nation* and Rob Watson of the *BBC*.

Mr. Otunnu welcome to **World Chronicle.**

OTUNNU: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, Graça Machel, the former First Lady of Mozambique, did a very comprehensive report on the problem of children caught in armed conflict in – toward the end of 1996. In fact, we had Madame Machel on this **World Chronicle** Programme shortly afterwards. Has any progress been made since that time to relieve this terrible problem, which is affecting so many children particularly in the Continent of Africa?

OTUNNU: Well, the problems that Graça Machel highlighted in her report was about the various ways, the multiple ways in which children are abused and brutalized in the context of war. In the middle of on-going conflict, as well as the impact of the conflict and she spoke to this problem on a worldwide scale because this is, in fact, a worldwide problem. As you know, there are today close to 30 major conflicts in the world and every single one of these ...

LITTLEJOHNS: These are internal conflicts, right?

OTUNNU: ... all of them are conflicts unfolding within national boundaries. So they are they are civil wars and the feature of the modern warfare that this is the case. But in every Continent from Western Europe, to the former Communist Block of Europe, to Asia to Latin America, to Africa, you will find theatres of conflict in which children are being abused and brutalized. So the task of Mrs. Graça Machel was to toss out these issues. My charge, since taking over this role, is to mobilize for action around the issues which Mrs. Graça Machel

describes. So Mrs. Graça Machel's task was to describe – to do a comprehensive study and she did that extremely well. It was very well received. My task is to mobilize for action around those issues.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, I noticed in your interim report to the Human Rights Commission this sentence, 'where it's on paper ... cannot save children in peril'. Well, the United Nations is an organization which is producing paper all the time, whether it is in the form of conventions, resolutions, or whatever. Are you saying that there's really not very much that the UN is able to do in that case?

OTUNNU: Well, my challenge is not uniquely to the United Nations. It is to the entire International Community – the concerned International Community – meaning certainly, the collectivity called the United Nations, the assemblage of governments called the United Nations. It means those key powers and governments individually. It means regional organization like the European Union and the Organization of African Unity. It means non-governmental organizations. It means the media. It's the broad spectrum of concerned entities and individuals within the International Community. What I am speaking about there, is the gap between words and action.

WATSON: Can I jump on that, Olara? You said at the beginning that it was Graça Machel's task to identify the problem and then yours – your only job is to tackle it – to mobilize process against it. You achieved anything yet?

OTUNNU: Yes, I have been now to a number of countries, not only at countries which are affected by war but also at countries which are concerned to work to promote this agenda, and my message has been this: we've had 50 years of the most impressive elaboration of international standards – from the Geneva Conventions to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention of the Rights of the Child – that's on the one hand, a very impressive repertoire of standards of international instrument, but on the other, when we look on the ground of what's happening in the thirty major conflicts in the world, there is no relationship between the two. It is as if none of these instruments existed and that gap is essentially a political gap. We celebrate the adoption of instruments, we take years to elaborate these instruments and believe me, we've achieved a great deal. What we have not been able to do – the International Community – is to follow the adoption of instruments with political action. That sends the message ....

WATSON: That's what I'm asking about – I mean, you said you've been to a

couple of countries and I'm one of those kind of people that I only understand things if you take me through it road by road – I mean if you've been through a couple of countries, and said to someone, 'look, pack this in, otherwise something bad will happen to you.

OTUNNU: Yes, I have been, for example to Liberia and my message was exactly that – Liberia, the country which faced about eight years of civil war. Now you've got a large number of kids on the street, without education, their health has been destroyed, families have been shattered, local family network is gone – the tremendous challenge which both the government of Liberia, the civil society as well as the International Community is facing and my message was exactly this. The same in Sierra Leone where I have been but also a number of governments. I have just been recently been to Canada for example, I was in the UK, I was in Japan, and the message is the same. Are the governments, which are concerned for the welfare of children, prepared to use their political, diplomatic wit to promote the protection of children.

WILLIAMS: One of the points is, has the United States ratified the Convention yet?

OTUNNU: The United States hasn't yet and part of my task is to work on that and I hope that in the not too distant future, it will be possible to get the most powerful country in the world to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

WILLIAMS: I understand in the Congress, one of the main objections is precisely some of what you have spoken about here is they want to be able to recruit for the US military people under eighteen and this has been one of the objections that has been touted in Congress. Have you been down there to talk to them about this?

OTUNNU: No, in fact, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the agreed age limit, presently, is fifteen for recruitment. But there is discussion going on in Geneva, the Working Group in Geneva, which has been working with the proposal to lift that age limit to eighteen. But there's no consensus on this yet. So as things stand, it's the age fifteen and that is what the US is being asked to ratify, and the Convention ....

WILLIAMS: And it still won't ...

OTUNNU: It hasn't done so yet. It hasn't done so yet and there's discussion about lifting the age limit. I certainly have been working to promote the lifting of the age limit to eighteen. Because it simply makes it easier to protect younger children if the ceiling is higher than when it is lower.

WILLIAMS: Have you been to see Senator Jesse Helms, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, about this?

OTUNNU: I have not seen Senator Helms yet. I look forward, sometime in the future, to meeting him and to putting this case to him directly.

WATSON: I'd like to take you back to where we were before because whatever the recruitment drive is, I don't see any US children involved in fighting each other under the age of ten apart from – in drug dealing. But back home to these people you have seen in Sierra Leone, in Liberia –I mean, what do these people say to you when you approach them, given that they themselves use children, and they're malicious when they were fighting?

OTUNNU: Well, they are prepared to cooperate with the International Community for the healing, for the rehabilitation, for the re-integration of children who have been traumatized, injured and whose youth and education have been lost to war. But the key to this really, is preventive. And the preventive measure means that the International Community, collectively, must be seen to send a message to all concerned that if you brutalize and abuse children in this way, if you flout the international instrument, if you flout the local value system which exist within every single one of this society, there's a price to be paid.

WATSON: Well, what is that price? Because that's the classic UN speak about messages being sent ...

OTUNNU: Not so – not so at all – not so at all. You know, it doesn't matter whether the belligerent is a state, a non-state fighting group, an insurgent group, whether they are remote from the centre of activities in the world, in every single one of this theatre of conflict, what is striking is the fact that the warring factions depend on the goodwill of the wide International Community to prosecute their war efforts. They depend on that Community for arms, for funds, for illicit trade in gold, timber and diamond. They crave for the political and diplomatic recognition of their wide International Community. They want tomorrow to be their table ...

WILLIAMS: Doesn't it seem that whenever they went, they actually get the recognition ...

WATSON: But this is a goodwill regardless of what they did to ....

OTUNNU: This is my point. That preventive action requires that the message should be sent now. That the message should be that – if you do this to children and women, there's a political price to be paid – and my point is that as of now, there's a gap between the

instruments which have been agreed upon and what has happened on the ground precisely because concerned countries have not made it their business to send clear message that there's a political to be paid if you abuse children in this way.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, the Security Council is the only organ of the United Nations with enforcement power. Do you feel that the Security Council should jump into this situation? Be a bit more active about it? I didn't recall the Security Council has opened its mouth about it.

OTUNNU: No, I have been speaking to individual Security Council Members and I hope, in the near future, to be able to speak collectively to the Security Council. My concern, with regard to the Security Council, is that the fate of children and women should be a routine item in their consideration. These are the very heart of peace and security. It's the women and children who suffer the most in this situation so it cannot be considered a peripheral issue in their consideration. But in terms of political pressure, political pressure does not simply mean enforcement action by the Security Council. The items I referred to – illicit trade in timber and gold and diamond – this had been conducted by private ....

WILLIAMS: But now you're talking about ...

OTUNNU: ... by private international entities – by multinational corporations. The craving for political and diplomatic recognition to the various governments, individual who confer these recognitions as well as collectively. So the point I'm making here – the role to be played by governments at a bilateral level, by regional organizations, by NGO communities, by the media – to expose and to bring pressure to bear on fighting groups who brutalize children and women.

WILLIAMS: Can you give an example where all these people has been brought to justice as a result of doing these?

OTUNNU: Look, I can't give you a simple example yet. That's why we have got to put this in place. We do not yet have, on the international scene today, a political atmosphere that says 'no' to these practices. And that is the purpose of the mobilization that must take place. That's the purpose of trying to build greater awareness so that, indeed, there can be a line drawn on the sand saying there are many terrible things that may happen in times of war, but we cannot accept the systematic brutalization of children and women.

WATSON: Well, I must say ... I won't fancy your job, Olara, because, well, call me cynical but one can see how these things happen ... why you knock on the door of the

government, one of the big power governments – United States, Britain, France, China, whatever – and you say, 'look, look chaps, it would be much better if you don't support this group because they do terrible things to children,' and they say, 'absolutely, we'll definitely bear that in mind, have a nice day,' and then they carry on supporting these groups because – they have various conflicts in Africa recently – because they see what that group is doing is in their strategic interest. So hard job, isn't it?

OTUNNU: That I understand entirely. But you know there are other areas where there have been breakthroughs. In the area of democracy, in the area of human rights, in the area of political as well as economic liberalization. These were all areas which were a 'free-for-all' in terms of East-West conflict and national interest, but today, a certain political mood has developed internationally that leans on governments, both developed countries and developing countries, at the very least, to pay lip service to these values.

WATSON: It certainly shows that the governments would rather support rebel movements which are less rather than more ghastly, but they're not exactly true ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, before you answer that ... This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Olara A. Otunnu, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

OTUNNU: But that's the reason, Rob, why the task of protecting children and women cannot be left exclusively to governments. It cannot be left exclusively to the United Nations. It must become an issue along with the broad concerned Members of the International Community – NGO, the media, parliamentarians, humanitarian groups – are mobilized so that they can lean on those who are making policy and can hold through the fire those who are making policy so that they can take seriously into account the welfare of children and women.

WILLIAMS: Recently, at the UN you hear of the ... finished yet another session on the international – proposed establishment of an international criminal court. Would you regard this as a suitable case for treatment for the court? That those people who have perpetrated these things, who have led children into wars should be held ... hold up before the court?

OTUNNU: No, the project for the creation of an international criminal court is a major development. This, too, is another example of something which, only a few years ago, was considered completely Utopian – a dream of the soft-headed. But today, there's a

momentum heading towards the realization of this project. The reasons why these projects are important are the following: one, it will affect not only official entities like governments but also insurgent groups. It will not only be concerned about governments and states but also individuals. Individuals will have responsibility under the new statute. And I am fighting to ensure that the protection and rights of children are fully taken into account under the statute, both in terms of what happens if you recruit young children into armed groups, but also in terms of juvenile justice – children who are accused of committing certain actions – how they should be treated.

WATSON: Call me an authoritarian, but I – I mean – I think that people who recruit children into army must be put in prison for an awful long time, don't you?

OTUNNU: Well, certainly, I'm advocating with a lot of other people that the recruitment of children being pressed into service in the way in which we are now seeing – there's somewhere close to, I think, a quarter of a million children right now under the age of eighteen, who are participating in armed conflicts around the world. So, we're certainly promoting the idea that the recruitment of children under the age of fifteen, which are presently the agreed age limit, should be a war crime.

WILLIAMS: Most of these children have been recruited since the signing of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child – about 7-8 years ago. So, obviously, this particular piece of paper is being happily ignored by lots of people around the world, some of whom are now respectable presidents of governments where they won the civil war.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say recruited, you mean actually forced into military service, right?

OTUNNU: It doesn't really matter how they end up participating and being recruited – whether they are enticed, whether they are abducted, whether they are, in some way, duped to join the groups, or whether they volunteered to come and participate – the fact of the matter is that, people who are young, children who are below the age of adulthood, should not be participating in war. War has – there's no place for children in warfare.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, earlier on you seemed to be talking about the possibility of sanctions. You mentioned that you had told the Liberians and the Sierra Leoneans that there was a price to be paid and you also mentioned the commodities which these countries – or many countries export. So if their ability to export is cut-off, in other words, sanctions are imposed, but your report also speaks of the consequences of sanctions on

children. We have got the example of Iraq and, I'm sure, there are many others. So, I mean, it's kind of an extremely difficult situation, isn't it? You apply sanctions on the one hand and children suffer on the other.

OTUNNU: Well, the kind of political pressure I am talking about need not be sanctions. You can call it broadly conditionality, if you like. We have now accepted within the International Community, conditionality in favour of democracy, in favour of economic liberalization, in favour of the promotion of human rights. Is it too much to ask that a similarly concerted effort be brought to bear for the sake of protecting children and women? It's the point that I'm making.

WATSON: So, the kind of thing you spoke about is something like President Clinton picking up the phone and saying, 'Sir, the next loan could be a lookout chap, you know you're not getting our support if there are any kids fighting in your army'.

OTUNNU: Absolutely. There are many ways by which one can apply this pressure. Why I say there's a trail – often a long trail – that leads from the outside world into the theatre of conflict and out again. And if those who lead these war efforts knew that the International Community was serious and watching what they were doing and that they would have to pay a price – a political price above all – they would be careful and they would watch what they did. At the moment, it's complete impunity. They do not care because there's no concerted effort to bring pressure to bear on them. So that's why, above all, this is a political project, to create a political atmosphere, to bring political pressure to bear and one can calibrate the levels of pressure. It doesn't have to be formal sanctions and, above all, targeted at the leaders who manipulate their population, who manipulate the children and exploit them. So above all, it's directed on them.

WATSON: I want to ask you - do you think that the people who recruit children and it's not malicious, do you think that they believe that what they're doing is wrong?

OTUNNU: There are two kinds. There are those who are completely cynical, with no sense of shame, and the only thing to which they can respond is absolute clear message with pressure to bear. That's the only way they can respond. There are others who may still be susceptible to shame. And this is part of the mobilization internationally to, if you like, to revive the notion of both shame as well as the notion of sanction for what you do. We have to work at both levels. But going back to your point about the impact of sanctions on children, among the issues on which I hope to work, is with members of the Security Council

and others to find ways by which one can apply sanction regime where they must be applied in such a way that children do not end up suffering the most out of sanction regime. In the Graça Machel Report these issues are highlighted. In reports since the publication of the Graça Machel Report that was published in 1996, we've had several examples being given, of concern being expressed by the International Community that children tend to suffer disproportionately. So we must work in concrete situation to find ways by which one can ameliorate this condition on the part of children.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, why are children being recruited at all? Surely there are enough adults to fight these wars without tapping the child population or young boys, young girls, as the case may be?

OTUNNU: Well, because in part, children are the most impressionable. They're like an empty vessel. You can shape them in whatever direction. You can indoctrinate them. You can inculcate them with hate, but also you can get them to do the most ruthless and reckless things more than you can with adults. So, if you like, they're the most vulnerable group that's why the leaders of these groups reach out for children. But also, in many cases, it is because the other structures within societies disintegrated – the family, the school system, the economy – and so, they find children who have nothing better to do and grab them and press them into their own service and exploit them for war efforts. So there are many reasons – going from economic to purely political to very cynical purposes – why children are recruited, forced, abducted and pressed into war efforts. But I should mention here, we must not forget that the impact of war on children is much larger than child soldiers and the recruitment of children into armed conflict. We've got the whole situation of children who are killed in the decade 1987 to '97. More than one million children were killed in war. We've got children who were traumatized in this conflict. Children who were injured. Children who have lost their parents. Children who were displaced and internally of the population of both refugees and internally displaced the world today – some 23 million people. Half that population are children – children who've lost their education and health who, we shouldn't forget – that is a larger problem than child soldiers even though the phenomenon of child soldiers is a particularly visible and reprehensible aspect of this problem. It's a larger problem.

WATSON: I want to get back to your job in particular, Olara. Presumably, as you described it, it's essentially a lobbying job. But, presumably, you haven't got the kind of budget that someone whose, I don't know, their publicity officer down in the bank on Wall

Street has got to do this. Are you on a shoestring there?

OTUNNU: Well, mine is above all, an advocacy job, you're right about that – Lobbying, advocacy, giving a public voice to this concern, highlighting this issue. Now, for that to be effective, I have to depend on a number of other actors on the ground. I have to depend on the media. I have to depend on the NGO's, on parliamentarians, on researchers, so the whole group of a network of constituencies that I should activate and link up with and make them participate in shaping this to make the advocacy successful. Moreover, I believe that only when, domestically, especially in countries which enjoyed democracy and prosperity and had peace, only when, at that on national level, they put a premium on the security, the welfare of children, can they extend that and express concern for the fate of children abroad who are not so fortunate – were caught up in war situations.

WILLIAMS: On following up Rob's point, obviously, if you try to get funding for an office here, one of the questions that might be asked is: what are you doing that United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) shouldn't do – why isn't UNICEF working on this? Why set up a separate department, a separate spokesman, when this is something that they should be doing?

OTUNNU: Well, the creation of this Office was actually at the suggestion of UNICEF and the High Commission for Refugees and the High Commission for Human Rights, because they felt there was a need for somebody to do the highest possible level of advocacy on these issues. But secondly, part of my job is, if you like humanitarian diplomacy, there are many situations in which NGO's, UN agencies are not able to do their work on the ground. Maybe they're denied access to populations in distress. Maybe there's a need to evacuate a group, there's a need to particularly protect schools and hospitals. There are various ways in which things have been blocked for them – the political blockade. My task is, in part, to try to open that way. To facilitate their work on the ground.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Otunnu, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Olara A. Otunnu, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of *The Nation* and Rob Watson of the *BBC*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**